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Armenia

TRANSITIONAL OR HYBRID REGIME

35
/100

Democracy Percentage	34.52 /100
Democracy Score	3.07 /7

LAST YEAR'S DEMOCRACY PERCENTAGE & STATUS

35 /100 Transitional or Hybrid Regime

The ratings are based on a scale of 1 to 7, with 7 representing the highest level of democratic progress and 1 the lowest. The Democracy Score is an average of ratings for the categories tracked in a given year. The Democracy Percentage, introduced in 2020, is a translation of the Democracy Score to the 0-100 scale, where 0 equals least democratic and 100 equals most democratic. See the methodology.



Authors

- Anonymous

Score changes in 2024

- National Democratic Governance rating declined from 2.50 to 2.25 due to the executive's consolidation of power, the multiyear trend of central authorities overreaching and impeaching opposition mayors, and the lack of transparency in ruling party finances.
- As a result, **Armenia's Democracy Score declined from 3.11 to 3.07.**

Executive Summary

In Armenia in 2023, the most significant political processes and concerns both stem from security issues, particularly relations with Azerbaijan and its 10-month-long blockade of the unrecognized but de facto independent Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh (known as Artsakh in Armenia) and the subsequent ethnic cleansing of the breakaway enclave after Azerbaijani aggression in September. Not only have these national security issues been Armenians' most significant concerns, ¹ but they also have shaped the domestic political landscape, with the opposition and large segments of the population criticizing the government for the failures of its Nagorno-Karabakh policy. ²

Attitudes among the Armenian public and government toward Russia have significantly deteriorated, due not only to the failure of the Russian peacekeepers deployed in Nagorno-Karabakh to resolve the blockade imposed by Azerbaijan and address the humanitarian crisis in the region, but also the permissive stance that Moscow was seen as taking during Azerbaijan's attack on Nagorno-Karabakh and the subsequent exodus of Armenians. In public perception, Russia has lost its long-favorable position, and, in a poll conducted in December 2023, 31 percent of respondents considered Russia to pose the greatest security threat to Armenia of any country. 40 percent said Russia was the greatest political threat, and 51 percent said it was the greatest economic threat. ³ The Armenian government has effectively frozen its activities in the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), accusing the alliance of failing in its collective defense obligations towards Armenia, in addition to alleging that Moscow was trying to stage a coup in Yerevan. Against this backdrop, relations with Western partners, and particularly with the European Union (EU), have warmed rapidly in 2023,

especially after Azerbaijan attacked Nagorno-Karabakh in September. However, the EU and the United States have failed to hold Azerbaijan accountable for its actions, even though they had drawn red lines for such a scenario. Brussels has moved on to a tactic of supporting Armenia's resilience by increasing support for reforms and elevating the level of the EU-Armenian relationship, with early signs of a possible path to EU membership on the margins of discussions.

The deterioration of the security situation only exacerbated the political polarization in Armenia's parliament between Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's ruling Civil Contract party and the opposition, undermining meaningful dialogue on critical issues. Nevertheless, Civil Contract's constitutional majority allows it to fast-track reforms almost without resistance, which greenlights the government's agenda but also bears the risks of lacking parliamentary checks and balances, especially due to the prime minister's extensive powers prescribed by the constitution.

In a possible indication that the existing balance of power in Armenia's domestic politics has crystalized, Civil Contract's approval ratings have stabilized somewhat despite the loss of Nagorno-Karabakh and the party remains the most popular in Armenia by far, though it falls short of enjoying the endorsement of a majority of the population in polls. The opposition remains unpopular, failing to attract support from voters who had been disappointed in the Civil Contract-led political establishment that rose to power following Armenia's 2018 Velvet Revolution. The public mood in Armenia as of 2023 suggests that the current opposition is not able to challenge the government meaningfully: incumbents tend to hold tight to their electorates evidenced by attempts to strengthen party structures, and seek junior coalition partners (witness the formation of such a coalition following Yerevan City Council elections in September), while no alternative forces that could burst into the political scene to attract the apathetic majority have been observed.

The Yerevan City Council elections were 2023's main event in terms of domestic politics, and could be regarded as an intermediate test of confidence between the previous nationwide legislative vote in 2021 and the upcoming elections in 2026. While the opposition is known to be stronger in Yerevan compared to most other regions, Civil Contract still managed to gain more votes than any other party; however, it fell far short of the threshold of seats necessary to install a mayor. In

fact, even in coalition with a minority partner—the Republic Party—the city is now governed by a minority council. Civil Contract also flexed its political muscle in the city councils of smaller communities, where, in a few cases, it continued its practice of impeaching opposition mayors using dubious tactics. The electoral process generally received a positive evaluation from local and international observers. However, it was also marked by the abuse of administrative resources by the ruling party at a scale unprecedented since the Velvet Revolution.

While one of the revolution's most heralded gains has been the decoupling of politics from big businesses and oligarchs, 2023 showed concerning signs of a reversal on that front. In particular, two separate investigative reports shed light on the lack of transparency regarding Civil Contract's sources of funding. Even more concerning, law enforcement agencies cleared Civil Contract of any wrongdoing, while Pashinyan apologized but said his party had not broken any laws.

Armenia made major positive reforms in 2023 regarding the judiciary, the police, the fight against corruption, fiscal policy, the electoral code, education, and territorial administration. International partners and Western partner states and institutions endorse and support the government's reform agenda. Civil society concerns about the inclusiveness of reform and policymaking processes persist, while meaningful cooperation is often limited to specific areas and depends on the inclinations of decision-makers already in place. Though some reforms deliver effective regulations, they often fall short of their objectives due to poor or inconsistent implementation.

At-A-Glance

In 2023, Armenia's most significant political processes were knitted to national security issues and Nagorno-Karabakh, notably concerning relations with Azerbaijan and the 10-month blockade of Nagorno-Karabakh followed by the region's ethnic cleansing. This situation heavily influenced domestic politics, with the government facing criticism from the public and opposition parties for its handling of Nagorno-Karabakh policy. Discontent towards Russia increased due to its inaction during the crisis and attempts at meddling in Armenia's domestic politics, leading to a deterioration in relations. Concomitantly, relations with Western partners, particularly the EU, intensified, centering on elevating the level

of partnership and even hinting at a possible path to EU membership for Armenia. The security crisis, among its other effects, exacerbated political polarization, hindering meaningful dialogue in parliament. Even though the ruling Civil Contract party comfortably maintained power without significant challengers in sight, it has suffered some declines in approval ratings as compared to its performance in the 2021 parliamentary elections. The 2023 Yerevan City Council elections reflected ongoing political dynamics, with the ruling party securing more votes than any other party but failing to form a majority government. Due to a lack of transparency and accountability in the financing of the ruling party, concerns arose about the returning political influence of big businesses, which could be a major setback from the goals and gains of the 2018 Velvet Revolution. The government has successfully pushed through a number of significant positive reforms, even though inclusiveness in policymaking and efficiency in policy implementation remain problematic.

National Democratic Governance 1.00-7.00 pts

Considers the democratic character of the governmental system; and the independence, effectiveness, and accountability of the legislative and executive branches.	2.25 / 7.00
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- Compared to the previous two years, which saw a constitutional crisis, an attempted coup, snap parliamentary elections, long opposition protests, and parliamentary boycotts, Armenian domestic politics in 2023 were more stable, with political activities concentrated mostly in the National Assembly. Armenia continued to make significant reforms touching on the judiciary, anticorruption efforts, territorial administration, education, and the drafting of constitutional changes.
- Armenian politics remain highly polarized between Civil Contract, which has remained in power since the 2018 Velvet Revolution, and the parties and proxies of the prerevolution political elites led by former presidents Robert Kocharyan and Serzh Sargsyan. However, this polarization is mainly limited to the core supporters of each group, while the vast majority of the population is politically apathetic and disempowered, as demonstrated by polls ⁴ and low electoral turnout. ⁵ With the backdrop of an inactive, disorganized parliamentary opposition and indications that Civil Contract's once-unchallenged popularity has now declined, ⁶ Pashinyan's party has

begun focusing on consolidating power at the level of Armenia's *marzes* (regions) by reinforcing regional party structures and attempting to regain control of communities where it had previously lost elections (see Local Democratic Governance).

- Two independent investigations conducted by the Armenian news outlets Infocom and CivilNet—the latter working in cooperation with the international Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) network—and released in early 2024 suggest that Civil Contract may have bypassed party financing rules and utilized unlawful mechanisms for fundraising in 2022 and 2023. ⁷ Notably, the investigations found that a large portion of individuals listed as Civil Contract donors were not aware of donations made on their behalf, that the donated amounts in many cases exceeded over half of purported donors' income, and that it appeared that individual contributions had been made in a coordinated manner; for example, the journalists described multiple donations of the same amount of money being made on the same day. The Infocom report alleged that suspicious donations were facilitated by employees of Armeconombank; ⁸ Khachatur Sukiasyan, a Civil Contract deputy in the National Assembly, and his family together own a majority stake in the bank. ⁹ The prosecutor's office found no evidence of a crime and Armeconombank denied any wrongdoing. ¹⁰
- In 2023, two important corruption trials of former presidents Kocharyan and Sargsyan concluded. The judge in Kocharyan's trial closed his case in December without acquitting or convicting him after he invoked the statute of limitations, which had expired in May. He had denied the corruption charges against him. ¹¹ Prosecutors dropped their case against Sargsyan in September, saying they had found no evidence in support of corruption allegations. ¹²
- The issues of Nagorno-Karabakh and security continued to dominate the political agenda and citizen's concerns. Azerbaijan's blockade ¹³ of the sole lifeline connecting Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh—the Lachin corridor—that began in December 2022 and lasted over nine months until the enclave's fall created a humanitarian catastrophe amounting to an act of genocide, according to the Genocide Convention definition of an act "deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction." ¹⁴

- Azerbaijan not only continued its deliberate starvation of the Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh but also initiated a full-scale offensive against the territory on September 19, 2023. ¹⁵ The Azerbaijani actions came in defiance of calls from states worldwide—including the United States, ¹⁶ France, ¹⁷ Great Britain, ¹⁸ and Russia ¹⁹ —as well as international voices like the EU, ²⁰ the United Nations secretary-general, ²¹ the chairman of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), ²² and an order from the International Court of Justice (ICJ), which Azerbaijan dismissed. ²³ As a result of the offensive, Nagorno-Karabakh has been ethnically cleansed, with over 100,000 ethnic Armenians fleeing Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia, reports of war crimes, ²⁴ officials who had served in the Republic of Artsakh's administration being kidnapped or arrested and transferred to the Azerbaijani capital of Baku, ²⁵ and the region's cultural heritage under threat of destruction. ²⁶ While the first shocks of the refugee crisis have passed, the Armenian government faces long-term social, legal, economic, and humanitarian predicaments. ²⁷
- The crisis was met by condemnations from the West. However, despite numerous calls from human rights activists and lawmakers, no sanctions have been applied against the Azerbaijani regime. ²⁸ The humanitarian crisis spilled over into a political one, triggering mass protests in Yerevan against Prime Minister Pashinyan's government for its failures. Though the movement was led by the unpopular parliamentary opposition and therefore failed to generate critical mobilization, the vast majority of Armenians had come to disapprove of Pashinyan's Nagorno-Karabakh policy even months before the September 19 invasion. ²⁹ In a departure from the ruling party's promises prior to the 2021 parliamentary elections, Pashinyan had subsequently announced that he was willing to recognize Azerbaijan's territorial integrity, including Nagorno-Karabakh, as long as the rights and security of Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh were guaranteed. ³⁰ Even though Pashinyan recognized Azerbaijan's territorial integrity at an October 2022 meeting with Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev mediated by European Council President Charles Michel and French President Emmanuel Macron, Baku delivered the exact opposite of the needed security guarantees by ethnically cleansing Nagorno-Karabakh's Armenian population. ³¹ Moreover, Baku's further territorial and political demands from Armenia threaten more regional instability.

- EU foreign ministers in November 2023 agreed to expand an EU civilian mission established the previous year to “observe and report on the security situation along the Armenian side of the international border with Azerbaijan.” **32** Armenia had welcomed the EU mission, while it had been condemned by Azerbaijan **33** and Russia. **34**
- The failure of Russian peacekeepers in Karabakh to prevent or stop the ethnic cleansing of Armenians was the culmination of a long souring of relations between Yerevan and Moscow. As Russian officials and media deployed provocative rhetoric against the Pashinyan government during and after the September events, **35** the Armenian ruling elite increasingly securitized its discourse about Armenia’s vulnerabilities vis-à-vis Russia, while Armenia at the same time took several minor but steady steps toward rapprochement with the EU. **36**

Electoral Process 1.00-7.00 pts

Examines national executive and legislative elections, the electoral framework, the functioning of multiparty systems, and popular participation in the political process.

3.50
/7.00

- In 2022, the Ministry of Justice of Armenia initiated amendments to the electoral code and related legislation. **37** The European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission) of the Council of Europe and the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) have welcomed the draft amendments, particularly praising the inclusiveness of the consultations and public discussions that preceded their initiation and the timing of the amendments three years before the next nationwide elections. **38** This is particularly noteworthy because in previous years, hasty amendments initiated a short time before elections—mostly snap elections—had been commonplace.
- However, the report regretted the failure to incorporate some previous recommendations of the Venice Commission and ODIHR that Armenia had not yet acted upon, which targeted electoral thresholds, timeframes for submitting challenges, recounts, and other aspects of the electoral process. Making these changes will require further amendments, violating the good practice of maintaining the stability of electoral legislation. **39**

- In late 2022, Armenia's National Assembly elected Vahagn Hovakimyan, who was known as a loyalist of Pashinian's, as the chairman of the Central Electoral Commission of Armenia (CEC). While Hovakimyan's election to the position was legal, ⁴⁰ he remained a National Assembly deputy with membership in Civil Contract until four days before his election, and voted in the election to install himself as head of the CEC. ⁴¹ . Hovakimyan's election drew concerns from civil society that it would imperil the independence and neutrality of the CEC and risked undermining the progress made in recent years. ⁴² Nevertheless, the new chairman has acted in a cooperative and inclusive manner toward civil society in several instances ⁴³ . However, some actions by Hovakimyan and the CEC ⁴⁴ concerning the Yerevan City Council elections have raised doubts among civil society about his impartiality. ⁴⁵
- Amendments to Armenia's constitution granted the right to put forward legislative initiatives if they can obtain at least 50,000 citizens' signatures. ⁴⁶ In 2023, this right was exercised for the first time by Hayaqve, a civil legislative initiative launched by a group of civic activists and opposition politicians demanding that recognizing Nagorno-Karabakh as part of any state be made a criminal offense. Though the initiative succeeded in collecting the required number of signatures, the National Assembly's Standing Committee on State and Legal Affairs voted it down. ⁴⁷
- In electoral terms, the highlight of 2023 in Armenia was the elections of the Yerevan City Council. Since Yerevan is home to more than a third of Armenia's population, the City Council election results had been anticipated as an important intermediary indicator for the ruling party ahead of the next nationwide legislative elections in 2026.
- The overall organization of elections was carried out in a professional and orderly manner, as reported by international observers. ⁴⁸ The process was free of the bribery and voter intimidation that had once been commonplace. It was largely carried out in a free and transparent manner, while contestants widely accepted the results. Nevertheless, the elections also saw the largest monitored misuse of administrative resources in favor of the ruling party since the Velvet Revolution in 2018, as well as lack of public interest and resulting low turnout, media manipulation, and polarization, all of which raise concerns about the the fairness of the pre-election processes.

- During the campaign period, local observers and independent media observed widespread misuse of administrative resources in favor of the ruling party, such as the engagement of district heads and their deputies in the campaign on questionable legal grounds, significant publicly funded urban renewal projects during the campaign that were seen as an attempts to influence voters, organized participation of the staff of the municipal and national administrative and educational institutions in rallies organized by Civil Contract, and unprecedented increases in municipal spending on various mass celebratory events featuring the ruling party candidates. **49**
- Civil Contract's misuse of administrative resources during the campaign and the mixing of ruling party candidates' political roles and municipal administrative duties **50** have been interpreted by local and international observers as blurring the line between state and party. **51**
- Tigran Avinyan, who successfully ran as Civil Contract's candidate for mayor in the 2023 elections in Yerevan, and others from the ruling party's list made verbal attacks and attempts to undermine the credibility of observation missions monitoring the elections, **52** questioning the sources of the missions' funding and accusing them of manipulation. **53**
- The Yerevan City Council elections' 28.5-percent turnout was well below the 44% turnout in Yerevan's previous city council elections in 2018.. The result is symptomatic of polarized domestic politics where the citizens are both disappointed in the postrevolutionary elites' failures and refuse to back the alternative represented by the previous regime. International Republican Institute (IRI) survey results from early 2023 indicate that 60 percent of Armenia's population does not trust any politician or public figure.. Meanwhile, when asked how they would react if national elections were held the following Sunday, 58 percent of Armenia's residents said they would either spoil their ballot, not vote at all or vote for no one, or refused or did not give an answer. **54**
- The election campaign was poisoned by widespread and coordinated social media behavior carried out by fake accounts supporting all sides, particularly by those in favor of the ruling party and against their opponents, as demonstrated by investigative journalists' reports. **55**

Civil Society 1.00-7.00 pts

Assesses the organizational capacity and financial sustainability of the civic sector; the legal and political environment in which it operates; the functioning of trade unions; interest group participation in the policy process; and the threat posed by antidemocratic extremist groups.

4.75
/7.00

- The legal and bureaucratic infrastructure and environment of Armenia do not pose significant restrictions and barriers for civil society organizations (CSOs) when registering the organizations, conducting activities, and enrolling members. According to the State Register Agency of Legal Entities, online NGO registrations will become possible in 2024. The legislative framework provides broad grounds for public participation and oversight, although problems remain in practice. The degree of meaningful cooperation between civil society and state institutions, though institutionalized in several offices and successful in a significant number of policy areas, still varies greatly from one area to another and largely depends on the goodwill of individual officials at the responsible authorities.
- In a positive and long-awaited change, the National Assembly adopted the Law on Volunteer Work in June 2023, establishing a unified legal basis for volunteering that includes their rights, status, protection, reimbursement, etc. ⁵⁶ The law has received several revisions and improvements after the first draft's introduction in 2017, incorporating most of the recommendations proposed by civil society. ⁵⁷
- As they did in the aftermath of the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War, Armenian NGOs have to a great extent focused on security and human rights issues in 2023 due to Azerbaijan's aggression against the Republic of Armenia and against Nagorno-Karabakh. Individual NGOs and coalitions of nonprofit groups have issued reports, recommendations, and statements directed at the Armenian government and international community, including the UN ⁵⁸ and its agencies, ⁵⁹ the United States, ⁶⁰ and the EU. ⁶¹ However, these efforts were futile, as the repeated warnings failed to generate a proper response from the international community to prevent the ethnic cleansing of Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh, as well as the continued aggressive acts and rhetoric by Azerbaijan, resulting in a general sense of disillusionment with the liberal international order and mechanisms. Following the mass exodus of over 100,000 Armenians from Nagorno-

Karabakh, civil society has been engaged in addressing the humanitarian crisis proactively and at a large scale. However, there has been little cooperation and coordination of efforts with state institutions and a lack of initiative by the latter to mobilize the resources of civil society.

- Individual CSOs and their coalitions periodically and freely express their positions on important policy and political developments in Armenia. In one prominent instance, following an incident where the speaker of parliament, Alen Simonyan, spat on a citizen after being called a “traitor” in public, a large number of CSOs demanded action from the authorities against the high-ranking official, calling on Civil Contract to establish an ethics commission and law enforcement agencies to investigate the case as hooliganism. ⁶² Both of those calls were dismissed with no consequences for Simonyan. ⁶³
- In May, an independent investigation reported the targeting of 12 individuals, including civil society representatives, journalists, and former officials, by Pegasus, an Israeli spyware program that was known to be sold to governments. ⁶⁴ Even though experts believe that Azerbaijan had been the perpetrator in these cases, here are reports that the Armenian government has used another spyware program, Predator, for domestic surveillance. ⁶⁵ Predator is produced by the Intellexa Consortium, a Greek company that is under US sanctions.
- In another negative trend in the relations between the ruling party and civil society, during the campaign leading up to the Yerevan City Council elections, Avinyan and other candidates from the party list restored to verbal attacks and attempts to undermine the credibility of election observation missions run by CSOs in response to reports by those organizations on the misuse of administrative resources by Civil Contract. ⁶⁶ Avinyan has also questioned the sources of CSOs’ funding and accused them of manipulating the elections. ⁶⁷
- Legislative amendments adopted in 2021 expanded the types of legal entities that were required to declare their ultimate beneficial owners has been expanded, and in 2023 CSOs became subject to that mandate. ⁶⁸ Although the requirement is aimed at increasing transparency, it remains poorly understood among many CSOs despite campaigns to increase awareness. ⁶⁹ It creates additional operational burdens, which are particularly problematic for small and regional CSOs with limited administrative capacity.

- Protests in 2023 were commonplace and were organized by political parties, civic initiatives, and CSOs. While nominally focusing on other/domestic social, political, or legal issues, the agendas of the protests have predominantly been dictated by persistent security threats and the conflict with Azerbaijan. ⁷⁰ Police were reported to use excessive force against protesters, especially during the protests triggered in the aftermath of the ethnic cleansing of Karabakh. ⁷¹ Some of the instances of brutality were in response to violence from protesters, but others were unprovoked. ⁷²
- An amendment to Armenia’s criminal code criminalizing public calls for violence and publicly justifying or advocating violence that was adopted in 2020 as Article 226.2 has since been mainly used against opposition voices, ⁷³ while offenses by progovernment actors were ignored. ⁷⁴

Independent Media 1.00-7.00 pts

Examines the current state of press freedom, including libel laws, harassment of journalists, and editorial independence; the operation of a financially viable and independent private press; and the functioning of the public media.

3.00
/7.00

- The Armenian media landscape remains widely polarized along political lines, ⁷⁵ with media outlets affiliated with both the ruling and opposition forces engaged in the distribution of content supporting their narratives. A small number of independent and mostly online media outlets carry on their crucial role of supplying the balanced, investigative news that is vital for a healthy democracy, and work largely unimpeded by political forces. Nevertheless, financial constraints, lack of independent fundraising opportunities and capacity, and commercial difficulties impede the financial viability of media outlets, raising the risk that they will start leaning on political or business sponsors and compromise editorial and ethical standards. ⁷⁶
- The year saw several regressive legislative initiatives by the government and ruling party legislators concerning access to information and freedom of expression. Notably, at the government’s initiative, the National Assembly added a new restrictive clause to the Law on Freedom of Information allowing requests for official data to be declined if the requested material contains “official information of limited distribution.” ⁷⁷ According to media

watchdogs, the vague and general character of the clause gives the government too much room for interpretation, further limiting journalists' access to official data. Even before the amendment, state institutions frequently denied inquiries or delayed the provision of requested data.

- Two other legislative amendments limiting freedom of expression and information were introduced in 2023, but were withdrawn, among other reasons, due to wide criticism by media and civil society. At the beginning of the year, the Ministry of Justice put forward amendments establishing almost complete government control over TV, social media, and the internet during wartime. Even though the amendments were withdrawn after a wave of criticism, the official reasoning for withdrawal suggests that the government will revisit the issue after the adoption of a new national security strategy, dubbed the Vision of the Comprehensive Defense and Security System of the Republic of Armenia, by Armenia's Security Council.

78 Another amendment put forward by a Civil Contract deputy concerning access to ecological information **79** was soon withdrawn by the author. **80**

- The proposals limiting freedom of expression and access to information have been harshly criticized **81** by media watchdogs, which, besides condemning the restrictive nature of the amendments' proposed legislative changes, expressed concern with the lack of prior consultation with relevant professional communities. **82** Such practice undermines the spirit of a memorandum signed in 2022 between journalistic NGOs and Armenia's legislative and executive bodies that committed the signatories to developing legislative consultation mechanisms. **83**
- Freedom House has previously noted the decriminalization of grave insults in 2022, which took away an instrument that could have been used against government critics. However, the ruling party similarly utilized the new criminal code amendment passed in 2020 that regulates hate speech that calls for or justifies violence. Since its passage in 2020, 36 out of the 38 cases that reached the courts concerned alleged calls for violence against the prime minister or his supporters. **84** The two exceptions that concerned calls for violence against the opposition came to trial in 2021, while in the following two years, the 26 cases coming to trial exclusively concerned calls against ruling party leaders and supporters, with the number of cases more than doubling in 2023 compared to 2022. Among the defendants are opposition politicians and active social media users (most cases were

initiated based on social media posts), who claim that the law is applied selectively and that law enforcement agencies have dismissed open calls and threats of violence by ruling party members.

- Nevertheless, the Ministry of Justice has actively engaged with CSOs, including Freedom House, to advance reforms on integrating media self-regulation systems into Armenian law. ⁸⁵
- In a positive legislative step, the National Assembly passed an amendment in September introducing gender quotas for the governing body of the Public Television Company of Armenia and for the Commission on Television and Radio, an independent regulatory body. ⁸⁶
- According to an analysis by local media watchdog the Committee to Protect Freedom of Expression (CPFE) of 2023 saw a decrease in the number of cases of physical violence against journalists as compared to 2022 dropping from 14 to 6, but a slight increase in instances where journalists were pressured or there were violations of the right to receive and disseminate information. ⁸⁷
- There has been a rise in the reported number of lawsuits involving media and journalists in 2023, compared to the previous year. ⁸⁸ . Journalistic organizations warn of “attempts to exploit legal procedures as a ‘punitive tool’ against the media.” ⁸⁹ On several occasions, party members—including Simonyan, the speaker of parliament, and Avinyan, the mayor of Yerevan—have brought legal proceedings against the media for damaging their reputations, and have requested that the court enforce a lien on the accused party’s assets commensurate with their claim’s stated value. In Avinyan’s case, following criticism from the local and international journalistic community, he asked the court to drop the asset freeze it had ordered. ⁹⁰ Prime Minister Pashinyan has even encouraged officials to sue media outlets that publish reports “falsely” accusing them of corruption, as a way to reverse Armenia decline in Transparency International’s Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI). ⁹¹
- Popular perceptions of the media environment have also grown more negative. According to research by the US-based nonprofit Internews, the proportion of the Armenian population that considers information presented by Armenian media to be somewhat or entirely reliable has dropped to 49 percent in 2023, a substantial decline from the 73 percent reported in 2021. ⁹² According to an IRI poll conducted in December 2023,

even though the public sees freedom of speech and media independence as the areas where Armenia is making the most progress, perceptions of both have suffered significant declines compared to the 2019 polls. **93**

Local Democratic Governance 1.00-7.00 pts

Considers the decentralization of power; the responsibilities, election, and capacity of local governmental bodies; and the transparency and accountability of local authorities.

2.25
/7.00

- In November, Armenia adopted amendments to the Law on Financial Equalization, which will allow the redirecting of more state subsidies from more financially viable communities to communities that were financially less capable, including those in remote or mountainous areas or on Armenia's borders. The amendments also allocate more subsidies for the smallest communities with less than 3,500 inhabitants, which are mostly home to ethnic minorities. **94**
- November also saw the government adopt a decision backing the decentralization of authority in Armenia, as well as an action plan of corresponding reforms aimed at improving democratic participation, capacity, and the quality of public services at the local level. **95**
- Against the backdrop of these critical reforms, local authorities' guarantees of independence and legitimacy have come under question due to Civil Contract's systematic attempts to force opposition mayors elected by their local constituencies out of office. Following attempts in several communities last year, the ruling party moved on to successfully oust the mayor of Alaverdi, Arkadi Tamazyan, in December. Tamazyan had led a slim coalition of the Country to Live and Armenian National Congress opposition parties, but another Country to Live councilor left the party and gave Civil Contract the majority it needed to pass a motion of no confidence. **96** CSOs warned that the mayor's impeachment was carried out illegally, and there were reports that Alaverdi councilors had come under pressure from the national executive and legislative branches.
- While the impeachment of mayors is a legal mechanism, the way the ruling party goes about it—accompanied by various forms of pressure, blackmail, and political favor-trading contravening the best interest of local governance—calls the legitimacy of these processes into question. **97** The ruling party

often points to legal issues with opposition parties' governance at the local level; however, when addressing them, it resorts to political instruments and mechanisms.

- Before the Yerevan City Council elections and following last year's ousting of Yerevan's mayor, Civil Contract in September 2022 had selected Avinyan, a former deputy prime minister, for the post of vice mayor of Yerevan; Avinyan later became the de facto mayor of the capital after the new mayor's resignation in March 2023, and up until he was elected to an official term as mayor in September 2023 (see Electoral Processes section). His time in office as deputy mayor was problematic due to factors highlighted by local observers, including violations of procedural regulations and incompatibility of offices; ⁹⁸ his retention of his seats on the boards of a state-owned investment fund and a university even after he took office, resulting in criminal proceedings over conflicts of interest; his use of his image as de facto mayor to boost his electoral chances; and the central government's unprecedented doubling of financial allocations given to Yerevan in an apparent attempt to provide Avinyan with a competitive advantage ahead of the . ⁹⁹
- Armenians are split when assessing local government performance, according to the IRI survey conducted in early 2023. Some 52 percent of respondents are very or somewhat satisfied with the work of local governments, an 11-point decline since the last poll conducted in December 2021. ¹⁰⁰

Judicial Framework and Independence 1.00-7.00 pts

Assesses constitutional and human rights protections, judicial independence, the status of ethnic minority rights, guarantees of equality before the law, treatment of suspects and prisoners, and compliance with judicial decisions.	2.75 /7.00
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- As judicial reforms in Armenia proceed, a number of measures have been undertaken to ease judges' overload and decrease their bureaucratic burdens, which have long presented obstacles for an effective judiciary.
- Following the election of former minister of justice Karen Andreasyan, a Civil Contract member, to head the Supreme Judicial Council (SJC) in 2022, his tenure as chairman has been marked by controversial decisions concerning

the appointment and dismissal of few judges. There are particular concerns over measures disciplining or otherwise going against judges questioning the SJC's independence, ¹⁰¹ as well as judges associated with the former regime.

¹⁰² Meanwhile, loyal judges with a questionable record of impartiality and independence are favored. ¹⁰³ The appointment of Mnatsakan Martirosyan, who received a negative result on his integrity check by Armenia's Corruption Prevention Commission and had a record of convicting political prisoners, as the chairman of Yerevan's First Instance Court of General Jurisdiction, sparked a backlash from Armenia's human rights community.

¹⁰⁴

- Opposition politicians, activists and lawyers have been complaining of the continuing practice of pretrial detention as a means of punishment. Even though Armenia has adopted alternative methods of restraint since 2021, such as house arrest and suspension from office, pretrial detention remains the most prevalent practice and is applied against a number of opposition figures. ¹⁰⁵
- Judge Davit Harutyunyan was fired after he criticized the Ministry of Justice and the SJC, which the latter interpret as a violation of judges' code of conduct and prohibition on political involvement as laid out in Articles 69 and 159 of the judicial code. ¹⁰⁶ Earlier, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) recommended amending those provisions to "distinguish grounds and procedures of disciplinary liability and imposed termination of powers of judges," but the Armenian government has not taken any action on the matter. ¹⁰⁷ The Venice Commission also pointed out the vagueness of the provisions in the judicial code. ¹⁰⁸
- During 2023, public watchdogs have been alarmed about the increase in cases of violence against citizens by the police and other law enforcement agencies, particularly concerning cases of violence reported against three lawyers at police stations while they were representing clients in police departments, after there had been no such cases in the preceding decade. ¹⁰⁹ Watchdogs also reported cases of physical and mental abuse against detainees by police officers. ¹¹⁰ Police brutality ¹¹¹ has been registered at protests, ¹¹² during regular patrols, ¹¹³ and while off-duty. ¹¹⁴
- In 2023, Armenia continued to reform law enforcement bodies. In a major step, a new Ministry of Internal Affairs was established with the main aim of bringing the police—formerly answering directly to the prime minister's

office—under greater civilian control and parliamentary oversight. However, the appointment of a former police chief, Vahe Ghazaryan, as the minister of internal affairs rather than a civilian sparked protests from some CSOs involved in the reform process, some of which pulled back their cooperation, citing a lack of progress and the government’s incremental approach to the reforms; distortion and resistance from the police leadership; and persistent corruption. ¹¹⁵

- Another major step toward law enforcement reform was the extension of the new Patrol Service—a unit trained to international policing standards and tasked with performing traffic enforcement, crowd control and street patrols—to all regions of Armenia with the support of international actors, including the United States, the EU, the OSCE, the UN Development Programme (UNDP), and the World Bank. Following the 2021 introduction of the Patrol Service in 2021 in Yerevan, public trust in the police among the population increased, with an IRI poll in late 2021 showing that 68 percent of respondents were satisfied with the police’s work. ¹¹⁶ Nevertheless, by 2023, satisfaction levels with the police declined by 6 points. ¹¹⁷

Corruption 1.00-7.00 pts

Looks at public perceptions of corruption, the business interests of top policymakers, laws on financial disclosure and conflict of interest, and the efficacy of anticorruption initiatives.

3.00
/7.00

- In 2023, Armenia adopted its Anticorruption Strategy for 2023–26, which focuses on preventing and combating corruption, anticorruption education and awareness, relations with the business sector, and improving the anticorruption monitoring and evaluation system. ¹¹⁸ The Public Administration Reform Strategy was also adopted during the same period. Both acts have been adopted through participatory consultations and there are high expectations of their effective implementation.
- A report published by the Council of Europe’s Group of States against Corruption (GRECO) in 2023 assessing Armenia’s progress in implementing anticorruption recommendations issued since 2015 concluded that nine out of 18 recommendations “have now been implemented satisfactorily or have been dealt with in a satisfactory manner. Nine recommendations have been partly implemented.” ¹¹⁹

- Several journalistic investigations throughout the year have revealed new cases of questionable conduct by officials or persons connected to them. Such investigations have revealed cases of real estate purchases by officials at preferential rates; ¹²⁰ takeovers of public land; ¹²¹ lack of official scrutiny into public servants' suspiciously large assets; ¹²² patterns of state purchases without public tenders from entities ¹²³ with questionable reputation ¹²⁴ or connections to authorities; ¹²⁵ and businesses, often engaged in illegal activities, ¹²⁶ whose success may rely on links to high-ranking ruling party members. ¹²⁷ The practice of public tenders being awarded to companies affiliated with ruling party politicians continues, and investigative journalists have singled out the risks of close relations between big businesses and high-ranking officials, while the prime minister has dismissed these concerns and deems such relationships as within the law. ¹²⁸ . Showing the importance of journalism to anticorruption efforts, Armenia's Transparency International Anticorruption Center (TIAC) presented its flagship Amalia Kostanyan Award in 2023 to two investigative journalists, Tirayr Muradyan and Mkrtich Karapetyan. ¹²⁹
- Pashinyan has repeatedly stated during 2023 that there is no systemic corruption in Armenia. ¹³⁰ Though watchdogs agree that the level of corruption has decreased since the revolution, some spoke out publicly to question Pashinyan's farfetched statement or refute it. ¹³¹
- While an increasing number of high-profile cases of corruption-related crimes have come under investigation, prosecutions take an extended amount of time and are often applied selectively. ¹³² At the same time, Armenia's multilayered anticorruption system is still undergoing institutional transformations that are hoped to increase the efficiency of anticorruption measures. ¹³³
- CSOs remain at the head of anticorruption education efforts, while the government remains passive despite education being one of the declared goals of the anticorruption strategy. The low level of public awareness and trust is manifested in the extremely low number of reports submitted through the country's online anonymous whistleblowers' platform, ¹³⁴ which the Ministry of Justice plans to address in cooperation with CSOs. ¹³⁵
- According to Transparency International's 2023 Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) Armenia's score has increased by 1 point compared to previous year and is equal to 47 ¹³⁶ .

- Public perceptions of the state of corruption in Armenia shows stagnation and decline compared to the previous years. According to IRI polls conducted in late 2023, 44 percent believed that the fight against corruption has improved over the past six months, while 21 percent believe it had worsened. Compared to a 2018 survey, the number of optimists regarding anticorruption efforts had declined by half, while the number of skeptics increased by a factor of more than 10, with almost no changes compared to the beginning of the year. **137**
- Civil Contract deputies voted in December against reelecting Haykuhi Harutyunyan as head of the Corruption Prevention Commission. Harutyunyan had initiated a number of investigations against ruling party representatives and their family members, raising further doubt about the government's interest and intention to combat corruption. **138**

Footnotes

- 1** Center for Insights in Survey Research (CISR), International Republican Institute (IRI), Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Armenia; December 2023 (Washington, DC: IRI, March 11, 2023), <https://www.iri.org/resources/public-opinion-survey-residents-of-armeni...>, 7–8.
- 2** Center for Insights in Survey Research (CISR), International Republican Institute (IRI), Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Armenia; December 2023 (Washington, DC: IRI, December, 2023), https://www.iri.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/IRI_Armenia-Public-Surve..., 37.
- 3** CISR, Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Armenia; December 2023, 56–57.
- 4** CISR, IRI, Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Armenia; January–March 2023 (Washington, DC: IRI, May 1, 2023), <https://www.iri.org/resources/public-opinion-survey-residents-of-armeni...>, 17–18.
- 5** Arshaluys Barseghyan, “Ruling Party Falls Short of Majority in Yerevan Elections,” Open Caucasus Media (OC Media), September 18, 2023, <https://oc-media.org/ruling-party-falls-short-of-majority-in-yerevan-el...>

More footnotes





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Global Freedom Score

54/100 **Partly Free**

Internet Freedom Score

72/100 **Free**

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